At 92,000, school voucher enrollment sets new record

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More than 92,000 Florida students are in private schools this year using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, an increase of more than 13,400 from last year.

The statewide voucher program grew more this year than any year since it began in 2002, according Step Up for Students, the non-profit agency that administers the bulk of the program.

The scholarship program provides private-school tuition to students from low-income families.

Enrollment this year is up in all Central Florida counties, with more than 8,900 students in Orange County using the program, as well as more than 3,300 in Osceola County, more than 1,200 in Seminole County, and more than 1,400 in Lake County, the agency said.

The state’s newer Gardiner Scholarship Program, started three years ago, also has grown, with more than 5,800 using that for the current school year — up more than 1,000 students from last year.

That program pays for private school or other services for students with certain disabilities.

The tax credit program has become Florida’s largest school-choice voucher program.

Advocates say it helps families whose children may be struggling in public school but who cannot afford private schools on their own.

It has its critics, though, including the statewide teachers union which filed a lawsuit in 2014, arguing the program unconstitutionally directs state money to religious schools and sets up a separate system of state-funded schools.

Nearly 70 percent of the students who participated last year attended religious schools. State courts have ruled against the Florida Education Association and the other advocacy groups that brought the suit.

The tax credit program is funded by corporate donations made in exchange for credits on state tax bills.